

## WALKING HISTORY by Michael Xiao Chua

### DEATH AND (OUR) BEGINNINGS

“Langit, lupa, impierno, im-im-impierno...” was a popular game that we played as kids. Years ago, I suddenly wondered why we teach this to kids when it describes violence, “saksak puso, tulo ang dugo!” Imagine.

But it describes our Christian Worldview and our belief in the afterlife. Note that although we have indigenous terms for heaven (langit) and earth (lupa), we borrowed the European term “inferno.” This means that before Catholicism, our ancient Filipinos had no concept of a place of eternal suffering. As it was explained to me by Dr. Zeus Salazar, “langit” for them is the place of the “bayani,” the rest goes to the underworld which is not really a bad place.

How to get to the afterlife? Expert interpretations of archaeological artifacts based on oral traditions can help explain this.

Many of our Austronesian ancestors bury their dead in burial jars such as those found in the Tabon Cave Complex, Palawan in 1964. Archaeologists classify these jars as primary burial jars, where they place the whole corpse, to secondary burial jars, smaller ones where they place bones.

One of the secondary burial jars found there was the Manunggul Jar, dated as far back to the Neolithic Period, about 710 B.C. Described by Dr. Robert Fox as “the work of an artist and master potter,” its design became part of the reverse side of our soon to be demonetized 1,000.00 bill. The two figures riding a boat reflect the effect of the Ancient Filipinos’ already sophisticated maritime culture to their worldview as studied by Dr. Bernadette Abrera: the “kaluluwa,” accompanied by an “abay” (companion) goes to the afterlife passing by the sea.

In many oral traditions, the “kaluluwa” goes back to the world to guide the living people and return in nature: in trees, mountains, rivers, rock and soil formations (the aetas call Mt. Pinatubo Apo Namalyari or the Lord who can make things possible, and the “nuno sa punso”). That’s why design of the Manunggul Jar shows us not two “kaluluwas” but three: The dead person, the “abay” and the boat, all of which had faces. This is the reason why our ancestors had so much respect for the environment not as dead things but creatures with life and soul, the home of their ancestors.

Some believe that these jars are so important people bring them every time they migrate. When they started settling down, they eventually buried their dead in soil, but as found in a Batanes gravesite, the marker stones formed a boat shape. In Cordillera, coffins were boat-shaped. All these make one wonder if the word “bangkay” has something to do with “bangka.”

This All Saints Day, let us remember how we Filipinos treat death with style then and now. Then, we stay awake all night, “lamay,” because the aswang might come and eat our loved one, and replace the corpse with a puno ng saging. So although we grieve, we also sing the virtues of the dead (Ilocano dung-aw as studied by Dr. Lars Ubaldo), and we gamble (saklaan fund-raising for those left behind). Wakes become family reunion as we help each other cope with loss and remember happy memories our loved one left us, then we laugh. What a happy colorful people we are.

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